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The Sustaining Utterance

Discourses on Chasidic
Thought

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Chapter One

The Letters of the Ten Utterances

The Baal Shem Tov explains the Divine word not as a metaphor, but as possessing specific actuality. This speech of God, which created the heavens, is actually present in the heavens; the very syllables and the letters of “Let there be a firmament” uphold the heavens and make it possible for the heavens to exist. It is not only something that occurred in the past, but is something that is taking place all the time; God speaks always. When a man speaks, his words, as definite substances, fade into nothingness. The Words of God remain forever. We comprehend this metaphorically, as though to illustrate that Divine speech makes things happen. But it is not only that which is manifested that endures, but also the very words and letters that continue to exist.

Let us endeavor to imagine that Divine speech is not a transient phenomenon, but a continuous one, repeating itself over and over. As though—and one must realize that this is only an illustration—one were to switch on an electric light. In alternating currents, such as we use here for ordinary purposes, the electric current goes back and forth all the time. One may thus see the Creation of the world as such a switching

on of a current. What is done by throwing a switch is not a completed action; it only releases a continuous and repeated movement of energy that remains dependent on the source. Divine speech is thus eternal in manifestation and is continually renewed. It is the formation of a pattern that endures as a dynamic interaction. The Baal Shem Tov once explained, in another context, how this was true of the Revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai. It was a speaking of the Eternal Word in the sense, too, that it is being eternally spoken. There has not been any ceasing of this Divine speech; it is we who have ceased to listen. At the confrontation of Sinai, not only was that said which was said, but it was granted us that our ears be opened to hear what was being said. And the Baal Shem Tov concludes by saying that anyone can be privileged to stand on Mount Sinai and hear the Torah at any moment in his life. The confrontation at Mount Sinai is unique and single, not because the word of God has ceased to be spoken, but because we do not let our ears remain open to hear it.

Therefore, we read, “If the letters of the Ten Utterances by which the earth was created during the six days of creation were to depart from it (but) for an instant, God forbid, it would revert to naught and absolute nothingness, exactly as before the six days of creation,” thus reiterating that the departing of the letters is not only a matter of loss of life force or of some other deprivation. If the Divine speech ceases, the result is a reverting to nonbeing. The letters of this Divine utterance did not create the things of the world; they are the very substance of things.

Here it would be helpful perhaps to bring another example—and again it has to be understood only as an illustration and not as any sort of description. When in our modern view of the world we speak of matter, it is only in very general and relative terms that we recognize it as solid and inert. An object like a table is composed of constantly moving particles whose physical solidity is rather questionable. Electrons may actually be apprehended as concentrated points of energy waves. In short, even within the realm of the physical world we are caught in a net of unreality; that which seems solid is not really so. It is not a matter of our senses deceiving us; the senses give a straightforward enough projection of things as they appear to be and as they are meant to be. What is being said by the teacher is that all matter,

even that which appears to us real and solid, derives its existence from the Divine word.

Thus, even in earth or water there is spiritual essence. The stone has more of a soul, in a way, than the human body because it is more completely dominated by the soul-of-the-stone, while man has more soul than the stone, because he has more independent essence. The soul-of-the-stone is the Divine, form-giving force that substantiates the stone; if this Divine force should depart from the stone, there is no stone at all. When the soul of man departs from his body, the body continues to exist for a short while. To remove the soul of the stone is like switching off the electric current; there is no more light and all is extinct.

We are confronted with the very human problem based on the fact that the soul and the body are not identical. Were the soul to so dominate the human being that life would express only the soul, then the human being would disappear as soon as the soul left. Which, incidentally, is connected with the matter of sin and repentance. For if a person sinned in such a way that his punishment is to be cut off, then his soul would be consumed and the person would cease to exist. The whole point of repentance is that a human being does, somehow, continue to exist, at least certain remnants do, in order to be able to make amends. In other words, human beings have, in this sense, a double life; there is the life of the body and the life of the soul. And it is this that makes for problems in the spiritual life, because the body has its own desires; it does not merely express the desires of the soul. For instance: I decide to put my hand into the fire and I can observe how the body protests.

This is what happens in the relations between body and soul in man. But inert matter has no such soul; there is no conflict of desires. The soul of an object is the essence of its physicality. That which we know as the physical stone is a physical projection of the letters of the Divine speech that gives the stone its being. Just as the spatial dimensions characteristic of matter are projections of the movement and arrangements of molecules, so is all that we know as the world a result of Divine utterance, which appears as stone, flower, or anything.

We read that "although the name 'stone' is not mentioned in the Ten Utterances recorded in the Torah, nevertheless life-force flows to the stone through combinations and substitutions of the letters that

are transposed in the 231 gates.” This endeavors to explain the relation between that which is divinely spoken and the infinite detail that is created thereby. When, for instance, it is written, “God said ‘Let there be a firmament,’” the words we read are some human version of that which God said. The inconceivable that is spoken by the Divine is translated in two ways. First, it is translated by the firmament itself (in all its details). Second, it is translated into that which is written in the Torah.

To use an example, we may conceive sound waves as being received and registered either by a magnetic tape or by a phonograph record. The magnetic tape will convert them into some sort of electromagnetic signals; the record will convert them into grooves on the vinyl material. These are two different translations of the sound waves that, when the sound is projected, are translated back into the same thing. Now—sound waves, in themselves, are neither magnetic signals on tape nor grooves in a record. When I wish to show them to anyone, I have to resort to one or another of the conversions or translations. In this sense, the letters of the Divine speech as manifested by the firmament are a different version, or another translation, of the same thing that is written in the Torah. Although one realizes that they are identical, one has to be aware of the fact that they are both humanized projections, that is, capable of being received and understood by man through his limited faculties. Thus, too, there are gifted persons who can look at a page of musical notes and not only sing them, but read them with pleasure as another reads a book and sometimes with even greater enjoyment than if they were to hear a concert rendering of the piece. This is more or less similar to what one may say of a great soul who reads the Torah—he hears the word of God in it, and it is for him a very different thing than for the one who reads logical sentences. Indeed, it may be said that the same thing holds true for any kind of reacting to the world; reception depends on one’s capacities. There is the famous story of the Baal HaTanya who, a short time before his death, called his grandson, later known as the Tzemach Tzedek, and asked him, “What do you see?” The boy replied that he saw the ordinary things of a house. “And I,” said the old man, “see only the word of God.” There is a level, then, at which a person ceases to see—when he becomes aware of the thing itself rather than what is apparent from its modes of projections.

The letters, and the words of Torah we make of them, are translations into a specific mode of communication, a contrivance called writing. On the other hand, every letter is a Divine force, and therefore these letters cannot appear to us directly as they are; moreover, there are also different combinations of letters. The same letters combine, not only in the form of words, but also in various other ways – circles within circles – from one level of meaning to higher levels, from essence to essence; and within these circles there are various revelations of the same thing.

The letters thus combine in various permutations until we get the word “stone.” Which is only partly to explain that the Ten Utterances contain all the letters—for the combination is not an accidental one resulting from chance groupings of the letters: it is a very definite union of three specific letters that belong to the earth. The word “stone” does not have any of the “letters” of “heaven” in it, but rather the three earthly letters it needs to undergo its various transmutations. Examples from modern chemistry may help us grasp the point. When working with chemical formulas, it makes a considerable difference if I replace any one letter with another. In modern organic chemistry, it is important even to designate direction, whether it is left or right—just as there are certain words, in Hebrew, composed of three letters, the third the same as the first, which have two distinct meanings depending on which “direction” they are read.

Hence, every created object has its own form, its own special essence, which is connected with the letters that formed it; and these letters are a certain expression of the Ten Utterances. When the Ten Utterances express themselves in another realm, and on another level, it does not manifest in the form of a stone. In a higher world, these Ten Utterances have another meaning; only as they are transmuted and descend to this world do they assume the meaning they have for us. It might be in place here to observe that in almost every domain these divisions are necessary and useful. For in the complex jumble of almost all compounded things in the world, an individual thing is defined by “number,” i.e., by size and the level occupied by the formula of its composition, and so on. In integral calculus there is a similar problem, of taking a formula and raising it to a certain power, the fourth or fifth or whatever, by which it undergoes a certain transmutation that gives the

result another meaning. All of which is only a reflection of a part of the problem we are dealing with here, in which the levels are not raised to the fourth or fifth power or even to the hundredth power, but to the millionth, in which the levels expand and grow in all directions. Thus, the basic formula of the Ten Utterances is broken up into a vast number of worlds in each of which there are different instructions given, the Divine forces manifest differently so that every object and detail, not only the stone as rock fragment, but every particle of substance in the universe, no matter where, derives its special being from a particular life-force. And this Divine speech, the special combination of letters that supports the being of this particle, is single and unique, and the particle next to it is another, with another history and another essence and another name.

Indeed, it is afterward mentioned that every single thing has its own name, even the smallest and most inconspicuous item. Incidentally, it is said that when parents give their child a name, thinking that they know exactly why they are doing so, the truth is that they don't know why they are choosing it. And if they make a mistake and give a wrong name, the child will afterward change it because the name is not his correct one. This attempt to define who one is spills over into the identity of every soul, which also has an appropriate name, a specific formula. It is so for every star in the sky, too, each one with its name: "He counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by their names..." (Psalms 147:4). On the other hand, there are things that, like points on a topographical map, can be sufficiently defined by their coordinates, the intersection of latitude and longitude. And if there are three dimensions, the appropriate numbers of each provide sufficient information to define it. Now, let us imagine something with thousands of dimensions, or even millions, each one requiring its own number or name, in order to express the formula of its being that is its animating power, its life-force. It is from this that the thing draws sustenance and that explains the essence of its soul, even if it is a stone, which does not mean, of course, that if I speak to a stone the stone will understand me, but rather that everything created out of Divine speech necessarily has a sort of soul of its own.

Interestingly, the great sage, the Maharal, also speaks of this, in his own terms, without Kabbalistic overtones, saying that miracle is based

on the fact that the human being who performs a miracle sees the Divine speech in the world more clearly than he sees the material substance of the world, and Divine speech is, to a degree, given to manipulation by the one who comprehends it. That is to say, the one who realizes that there is no table here has gone beyond the table, while for the one who does not see this, the table remains a table. It seems to be a question then: Where am I in terms of things? What is my relation to the objects of the world? Such as, for instance, the miracle that everyone can perform—walking on what is called the waters of the lake, when it is frozen over. The problem, then, is how I can relate to things in their changing state, and to what extent I am able to expand my relations to a static, immobile condition. From this point of view, the miracle is a matter of shifting things about a little in the world.

Incidentally, the matter of repentance is also a similar problem. By repentance, I reach a certain level, by virtue of which I change something—and the whole point of repentance is that it alters some genuine reality in the world. Only when a person reaches such a level can he be said to atone. The world and its objects seem to be fixed only because we are all suspended within the same dimension. The man who is able to act on things in a different dimension, such as that of the microscopic world or of nuclear physics, does not feel that there is any difference between solid matter and any other kind of matter. As far as electrons are concerned, it is all the same, whether they go through gases or through solid metal. We may add that also in our ordinary existence we live on a number of levels, and when I am on a certain level, then for something to have a distinguishable form on another level, it is sufficient for it to appear to be so. So that what is spiritual and what is physical depends on the relation I have, from my vantage point, to the things concerned.

Chapter Two

Life and Providence

The Ten Utterances are very inclusive forces creating whole worlds and general essences. Only as a result of combinations, descents, replacements, and substitutions of their letters, from level to level, is it possible, finally, to reach a specific creation, such as a star, a human being, a blade of grass, and the like.

The question is asked whether that would be the name of the particular thing. To be sure, the name serves not only as a means of distinguishing things, but as a formula defining the essence of the thing. Thus, the name, which is the formula of something, becomes that by which it is called in the Holy Tongue, which in turn becomes a vessel, concentrating in its letters the life force of the object.

Indeed, this was one of the reasons for the opposition to modern Hebrew. It wasn't a matter of the secular usage of the Holy Tongue; after all, one can also use biblical Hebrew to express all sorts of vulgar banalities. It was not the misuse of the language, then, that aroused concern, but the creation of new names, new words. This was considered an act of primordial creation and not to be done artificially, without proper knowledge. And in this sense Hebrew is no longer purely a holy language, because there is no sacred relation between the thing and its

name. The name we humans give to an object is often a product of whim, unrelated to its real essence.

In any event, the intention here is that the name of a thing is its basic formula, and when this is not complete in some way, even in the spelling or punctuation, most certainly on the level of its distinctiveness, the object is that much less existent.

The essential point is that the things in the world exist by virtue of the fact that the Divine speech continues to be spoken in them. The Divine speech is not a unique phenomenon; it is a continuous action, a process, of what is sometimes known as the “231 gates” (the possible combinations of each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet with one another), interrelating and interweaving in myriads of ramifications, echoing and reverberating from form to form, so that the speech and the echo of this speech are that which create the world. The Divine speech sustains the heavens and the earth, and when the speaking stops, heaven and earth cease to exist.

Divine providence is not a general expression for a total state of affairs; it is something very definite that belongs to every created thing in the universe. Not only does Providence manifest on a grand scale; it is just as evident in the most insignificant event that occurs to a blade of grass, to a worm. It is all connected, of course, with the power of the letters, signs, and symbols of the Torah—which, incidentally, have always been greatly misunderstood.

The error stems from an incorrect comparison with the human concept of creating or making. It is stated that God made the heaven and the earth, and we say that man also makes things. The fundamental problem, then, concerns the concept of Creation, of making the world. In philosophical thought known as “Deism,” the Creator makes the world and leaves it to go by itself. To be sure, even in the Bible there are a few instances when God seems to have abandoned the world to its own devices. However, this is not the problem here, nor whether it is blasphemy or not, because the whole image of a world abandoned by its Creator is based on a false analogy. The difference between human creativity and Divine creativity is not a matter of who is doing the creating, but of the essence of the created thing and the act of creation.

For example, let us take a living creature that has already matured and been made whole. At the same time, the body has to renew itself continuously; there has to be ever additional creation for the body to remain alive. This points to the difference between the completion of a design and the process of creation. The process of creation is continuous; at the same time, it follows a pattern of growth, of individual completion and disintegration. The world is sustained by the continuous “saying” of the same Ten Utterances forever. The work of man is actually secondary and external; he merely alters the shape of the original substance, whereas the Divine action is that of making something come into being where nothing at all existed.

When one is working with nature, it is not necessary to keep a strong hold on the thing being created; one may rely on a system of natural forces to bring about certain developments in the creative process. On the other hand, when one operates against nature, it is necessary to be incessantly active and alert in order to make certain things happen. Thus, if a ball is rolled on a level surface, a little push is enough to set it in a certain direction, and when it stops rolling there is no need to hold it to prevent its rolling back, which is not true if one lifts something. In nature, there are changes of all sorts; man adapts himself to them. Indeed, it does not matter what form the molten silver takes; whether an ingot or a cup, it remains silver. Whereas the splitting of the Red Sea is against nature and has to be constantly sustained for the duration of the crossing, like the Creation of the world itself, which is, of course, the ultimate act against nature.

To change the nature of something, or to perform a miracle, requires the continuous action of a force, and this is true even for things that, in themselves, are not absolute. Thus, for instance, water flows, but ice stands still; nevertheless, one would have to exert some steady force in the realm of temperature, for example, for each of them to continue to be what they are.

Thus, too, the Creation of the world is the changing of nothing into something; to do so, there must be something, some force, to ensure that the something will not return to its former state of nonbeing. In other words, one has to maintain a constant hold on the nothing, first to change it to its present form and then to make sure it doesn't return to itself.

Creation of the world is not a mere change of form, however; it is an action against the very nature of reality, which is Zero or Nothing. This basic zero state is fundamental; everything that exists is an emergence from the primordial emptiness, and it continues to exist by virtue of the constant force that sustains it. In scientific terms one would say that Creation is the unceasing force opposing entropy.

As has been mentioned, a person has to grow and to keep growing all the time. He stands against the wearing away of the world, its tendency to level out toward zero. In order to exist, one has to create, to be repeatedly born anew, to do something meaningful. Existence itself is thus seen as an unnatural state that has to be maintained; when the force that does so ceases to function, existence ceases. A poetic image of this says that the world is held in the arms of God. Otherwise, it would fall into the abyss of nothingness.

It might be self-evident that if life is withdrawn the result is death. But even inorganic substance, even dead matter, is dependent on the sustaining force of the Creator. Life, then, can be considered a wondrous thing, but it is only a detail in the miracle of the ongoing existence of the world.

How are we to explain the expression: “You give life to them”? The word “You” is directed to that which is so much greater than anything that can be conceived by man; it would be absurd to think we could thereby be expressing the truth of the relation. It would be more correct to say that just as man is greater in his wholeness than any ten sentences he may utter, so is God more than the Ten Utterances of His act of Creation. The vastness of the unuttered potential is inconceivably greater than that which is expressed, even if it is the cosmos itself.

Which brings us to the ambivalent relationship of man to faith. On the one hand, we feel God to be very near; on the other, as we see, He is very distant. We call Him Father. We also call Him “Ein Sof” (Infinite). Actually, one needs both of these, especially when one is concerned with the question of Divine providence. For whenever one moves something—even to the slightest degree—it has a reason and a result. As the Tzadik said, lifting up a handful of sand and letting it run out through his fingers: “He who does not believe that every one of these particles returns exactly to the place that God wishes is

a heretic.” Another image, attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, says that sometimes a great storm comes, hurls everything about, and causes the trees to shake violently so that the leaves fall. One such leaf may drop close to a worm, and it was for this that the whole world was in a furor—that a worm may eat of a certain leaf.

This, then, is the aspect of personal Providence. God’s word activates and changes the world all the time; at every moment there is a totally new state of affairs. Whether a microbe or a galaxy, all are equally part of this and are in the same proportion to Him. This means that God is close to us without ceasing; nothing can occur without Him. To be sure, it includes the bad as well as the good, for we need the flow of life in us even when we transgress. On the other hand, there is God the Ein Sof, who gives life to all that is. In both cases, we address Him with the same “Thou” or “You” — “You” is both the speaker and the speech, the Ten Utterances and the alphabet, Torah and world.



Clearly, a biblical expression such as “and God said” is not intended to show resemblance between human speech and Divine speech. What is meant is obviously another kind of analogy, and its purpose is to enable us to relate to God and to understand Scripture in a human fashion. Basically, what is being stated is that something has been communicated by God; a certain knowledge or information has been transmitted down from one plane to another.

This particular mode of explanation, rather than a more reverential or poetic one, is deliberately chosen. A metaphor, for instance, is generally used to convey some emotional or poetic relation, and is not to be relied on for precision; that is, every person may interpret it somewhat differently. What we have here is more in the nature of an operative model, something on our own level that will enable us to comprehend what is happening on a higher plane, beyond our comprehension.

As an aside, one may point out that there have been different approaches to this problem, one of them being the rationalist philosophic school. According to this outlook, the scriptural expression is borrowed from human experience only to indicate a certain relation. Expressions

such as, “The arm of the Lord,” “The breath of Thy nostrils,” “His feet stand on the Mount of Olives,” etc., state something very general, far too inclusive to be emotionally evocative, and not necessarily human in the sense of an exact description of anything. As the Rambam says, rather sagaciously: phrases like “and God descended,” “He came,” “and God spoke” are all to be interpreted as modes of revelation.

The Kabbalistic explanation, on the other hand, confirming that the Divine may not be regarded as having a form or body and, in certain ways, even more removed from any concretization than the philosophic approach, sees these scriptural expressions as models, so that in Kabbalistic interpretation there is a meaningful difference between “He stands” and “He dwells” and the like. There are not only emotional ramifications in these distinctions, but also very specific spiritual, intellectual significance. In any event, it is clear that we cannot transfer the image of God speaking to a human level, even though there is an operational resemblance. There has to be a switch over to another plane or dimension of being.

Divine speech appears to the prophet in a manner specific to him. He doesn’t necessarily hear precisely these sounds or letters. The communication or prophecy takes the form that the prophet’s receptivity is most likely to absorb and comprehend. It may thus be revealed visually as a vision or a figure or a scene, or audibly as clearly comprehensible speech, or intellectually in terms of symbols, letters, or thought transfer, or even as an idea grasped through the agency of something or someone else. Whatever the medium of transfer, the prophetic message is adapted to the prophet himself.

In all instances, it is a force incapable of being described by words or images, even though that is the way it may be revealed in prophecy. And when it manifests as a physical world, material things are created rather than words: sky or mountain, man or particle are modes of expressions of Divine speech in a different medium.

It depends, then, through what instrument the Divine speech manifests, and on what level it is spoken. Thus, the combination of letters we read as “Shor” (Ox) may be interpreted in a variety of ways. It may be considered as one of the four creatures of the Divine Chariot (as in Ezekiel). It can also be an animal grazing in the field. In a manner

of speaking it is the same ox. The Divine-angelic creature is the same as the grass-eating beast; it has simply been translated in a different medium. The ox in each case assumes the features of the framework in which it is manifesting. In the physical world it assumes the particularity and limitations of an animal; in the heavenly world it becomes a holy, angelic, and spiritual entity.

There remains an essential bond between the two, however, but it is so inward and hidden that only someone who is able to see things in their deeper reality, like the prophet, can say that a certain angel has the face of an ox. It is not a matter of platonic ideas, of an ox-ness as basic essence or as an absolute in an abstract world. In fact, the combination of letters “shor” has no more to do with the ox in the field than the angelic being that emerges from the word “shor.” The same thing has been allowed to emanate in different forms. Let us take an illustration from the realm of geometry. What happens to a simple form like a circle when it is projected in a variety of different angles? From one it will preserve the form of a circle; from most angles it is likely to lose it and take on entirely different forms. And it is quite impossible to say that one is better, or more correct than another.

What is being stated here is that on all levels of existence the Divine speech, whether as words of Torah or as created world, is always the same thing. The relation between the different manifestations is very profound; but each is saying the same thing. God “speaks” in the world; God “speaks” in the Torah. The difference between them is explained by the fact that what is known as prophecy comes from another world, the World of Emanation as it is revealed in the World of Creation. This means that the prophet who beholds something and the ordinary man who has a vision of some sort may be seeing the same thing except that it is not on the same level. The difference depends on two things. The first difference is in the clarity; the prophet sees things in general; the higher and more distinct his vision, the less he sees the interaction in the world with all its complexities. In this sense, the angel is much simpler than man. The angelic creature of the Chariot with the face of an ox is a much simpler being, even though he is much higher than the grass-eating ox in the field, because this latter ox expresses the projections of many worlds, one on top of the other, whereas the angel is himself the thing; that is

to say, he is more singular, uncommon, and unencumbered and, therefore, clearer. As it is said, when the Divine speech comes from a higher plane, it is clearer and more comprehensible to the student of Torah.

The second difference is like that which is explained in the introduction to *Tikunei Zohar*. If our world were altogether static, it would express the Divine speech in an even and steady fashion. But since our world is dynamic and—especially as a result of human intervention—rather unstable and disharmonious, the Divine speech is not expressed as it should be. To illustrate, let us imagine an arrangement of letters constituting a text and that this is given over to a group of children. Some of the children move the letters, either by chance or wanton playfulness, so that whatever was written can no longer be deciphered. In fact, the whole concept of Paradise is that of a place or an essence on earth where the proportions or arrangements are undisturbed, perfect and unpolluted by man. It is not a matter of human sin acting as pollution, but rather the misuse of human freedom, of free choice, because in our freedom to choose, we, who do not know how to read, misplace the letters of Creation and put things in disorder. The task of mitzvot (commandments) of the Torah is to restore order, to arrange things to form a harmony and put every item in its proper place. Chasidism often conveyed this in the form of parable and story, as in the stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. In short, the world is not functioning properly because things are not where they should be, and the mitzvah is that which enables us to set a specific thing in its own place. Whatever you do, perform it according to a certain order or design. Because these patterns, as indicated in the Torah, are intended to restore the order of the world. The Torah thus serves as a map that represents, not an existing reality, but an ideal one. The ideal reality is that which the world aspires to become. And the forms of this perfected world are those that permit the utmost freedom of action and on which the Torah can have the greatest effect.

Thus, everything has a soul, and the soul of a thing is the Divine speech that speaks the thing, either directly or as an echo or as a re-echoing refrain. The Divine speech says: the sun, the stone, the tree—and if one studies it carefully one can comprehend the relation between the revealed form of sun, stone, or tree, and that inward thing that is its animating soul.

On the one hand, then, everything is an expression of the Divine. There is nothing but His speech. On the other hand, the table *is* a table, the chair *is* a chair, I *am* I. And this latter common-sense seeing is very much a matter of the observer and the angle of vision; even if it doesn't say anything certain about the object, it truthfully reflects the subject and the modes of perception.

Moreover, the reality of the world is nowadays apprehended in terms of electromagnetic fields. But when I look at the world I do not see electromagnetic fields, nor do I perceive any diagrammatic representation of a mathematical formula; what I see is, again, table, chair, arm, and leg. Which is to say that my organs of perception do not see. And it is known that our vision is limited to a narrow range of light-waves of a certain size, from which we may conclude that we have to use our understanding to see that which our vision cannot ascertain.

In the same way, since the eyes of the body cannot ever hope to see the Holy One, Blessed be He, the problem is one of using the right means of explanation. All too often the wrong tools are used to describe or illumine certain concepts; for instance, to say that an intelligence is so complex that it cannot be touched. It becomes absurd because intelligence is not touchable. The two essences do not belong together.

The fact that we perceive things as tangible solids is a reflection of our own incapacity to see their spiritual essence, which has quite another appearance. There are two levels of perception. One is the grasp of the actuality of matter as solids in which certain forces are at work. The other is the recognition that solid matter is an illusion of the senses, and that reality consists of a relation between certain forces or energies. What is more, the force that animates the thing is the thing; without it, the thing would not be. It is not only a matter of a relation between matter and spirit, but rather that matter, or the world, is itself Divine speech.

From this point of view, there is nothing else but God; only He exists, and the world we know is an aspect of His speech as perceived by our senses. This does not mean that the world does not exist as world or that it is an illusion. On the contrary, the world is very real indeed; it is objective and true, even if not necessarily material and self-sustaining. The paradox, as seen by the mind, can be reduced to the questions put by both the philosophers and the Kabbalists concerning the relation

between the world and God. If we presume one, how can the other exist? It is an insoluble problem for both. If the world is God speaking to Himself, then God remains alone even after Creation, and matter is only another form of eternal spirit and there is no contradiction between them. Indeed, both matter and spirit are external manifestations—to say that God is spiritual is just as erroneous as to say that God is material, for no quality may pertain to Him as the ultimate reality. Both matter and spirit are modes of Divine projection, emanations of certain aspects of His being. He Himself, as said, cannot be described or defined in any way.

Divine speech is therefore the only objective reality. The forms we recognize as real are dependent on our instruments of perception. If we had other instruments of perception, we would surely apprehend another world entirely. Just as an angel probably sees a different world, or a donkey, or even different kinds of men. That which is perceived may thus be considered of secondary importance; what is significant is that there does exist a world that is the object of our perception and that it is somehow “real.” The problem, then, remains—what is the relation between this grasped reality and the Divine speech that is beyond grasp, but in whose existence we must believe?

To illustrate the nature of a possible answer, let us consider the sun and its light. This light of the sun illumines the earth, and it also gives the sun itself its radiance; one can hardly say that the light of the earth illumines the sun. In this sense, the light we receive, even though its source is in the sun itself, does not add anything or detract. Its use is totally given over to cause and effect; if the light is blocked, there is no illumination. The light itself does not have to do any illuminating; it gives light to things because it is itself light. The point being made here is that the amount of light revealed on earth exists to the same extent in the sun; it is just that in the sun it is insignificant, swallowed up in the vastly greater light of its origin, while on earth, because there is distance—and this is all we have of the source of all life—we relate to it accordingly. This then serves as an illustration for the life that comes from God. In spite of the fact that He is the Creator of all that is, it is all as nothing to God, reduced as it is to insignificance by His infinity. In other words, the truth of the matter is that the Divine did not create something out of nothing. He created “nothing” out of something that is Himself.

The nothingness of the world is not necessarily an objective evaluation. From the perspective of man, it is nothing because it is beyond his grasp; from the perspective of God, it is nothing because it is so insignificant. Objectively, there does seem to be some sort of gradation, from greater light to lesser light down to the various facets of the world. Very often, however, we see objects, or wretchedness, rather than light. We fail to see that that which exists as objectively real for us is another expression of the Divine, of His holiness and His will. Indeed, in order for man to accept the world as real—rather than nothing—it has to be seen as having meaning, that is, sanctity.

The world may thus be considered as “something” because the true nothing is somewhere at a zero point in between man and God. We are a certain “something,” aware of both what He is and what we are.